

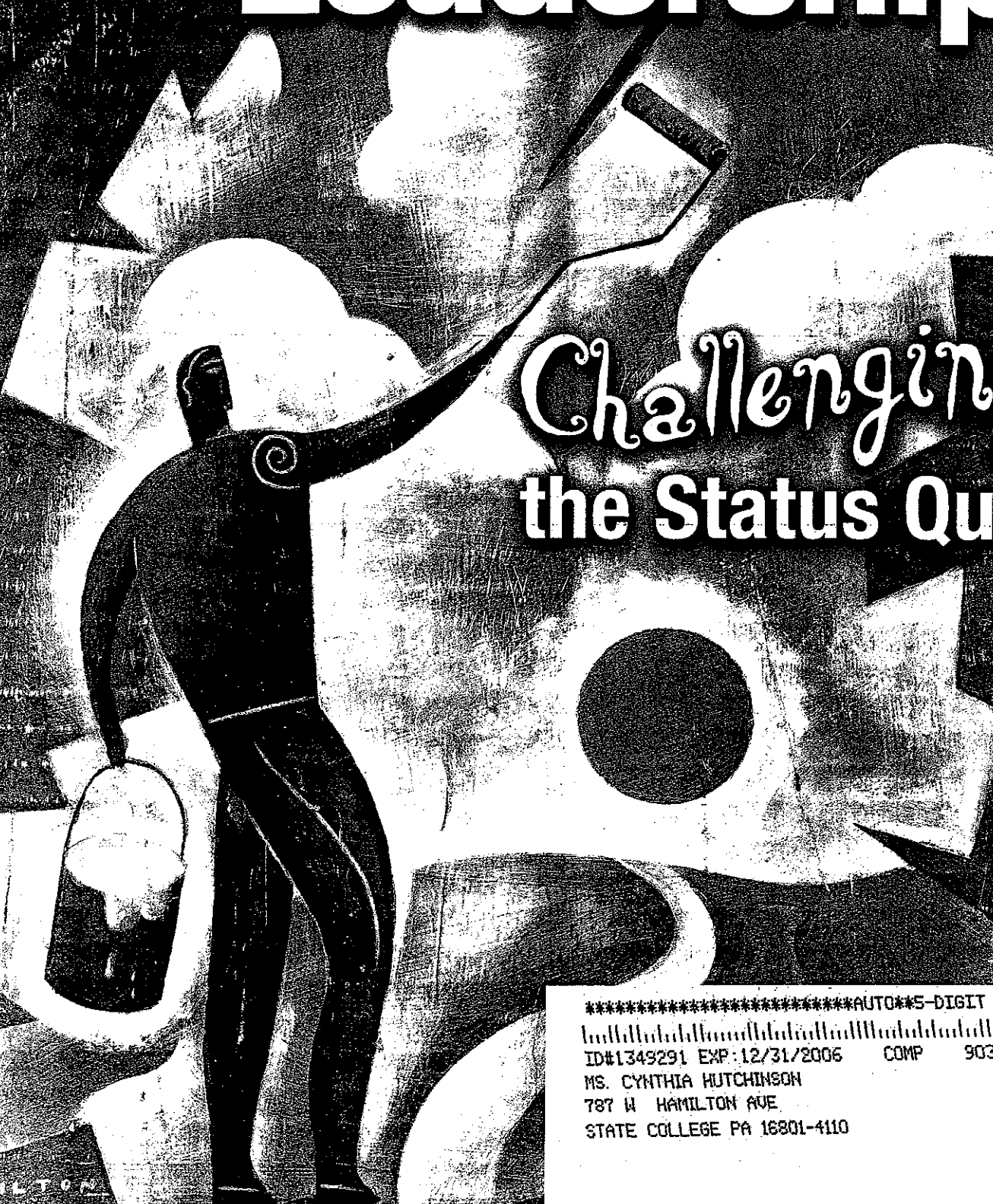
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## Challenging the Status Quo

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# Uncovering Teacher

*It's risky to move out of your comfort zone—  
especially when it pushes your colleagues out of theirs.*

**Richard Ackerman and Sarah V. Mackenzie**

**T**he next generation of teacher leaders is here. They charge ahead with new ideas for improving teaching and learning. Or they resist a change initiative because they believe it would disadvantage certain students. Sometimes teacher leaders voice their colleagues' points of view; sometimes their views merge with those of administrators with whom they lead an effective reform effort. Occasionally, they are lone voices asking hard questions or pushing against what others are willing to let stand.

Teacher leaders carry the weight of responsibility for ensuring that reforms take root in the classroom and deepen the learning of all students. They are also a school's conscience. They care deeply about students and about the institutions designed to help students learn, and they continually think about the gap between the real and the ideal in schools. The discrepancies they witness compel them to challenge the status quo.

## **Starting with the Classroom**

In the past, teacher leaders have held formal positions, such as department chair or team leader. They have often moved out of the classroom to take curriculum coordination or consulting teacher roles. In the current wave of teacher leadership, however, teacher leaders derive their authority from their experience in the classroom (Silva, Gimbert, & Nolan, 2000). The formal teacher leader roles still exist, of course, but more teachers lead informally by revealing their classroom practice, sharing their expertise, asking questions of colleagues, mentoring new teachers, and modeling how teachers collaborate on issues of practice. Many principals nurture and support teacher leadership because they know how crucial it is to establish improvements in teaching and learning at the classroom level.

However, teacher leaders still contend with several challenges dictated by the status quo. In many schools, notions of

leadership are embedded in hierarchy and role definitions. Moreover, the conservatism of teachers and their isolation in the classroom (Lortie, 1975) frequently frustrate leadership. By surfacing tensions between the school's mission and its actual practices, teacher leaders can also discomfort colleagues and threaten administrators and teachers alike. Nevertheless, teacher leaders, empowered by their confidence in themselves and their colleagues, hold the key to improved learning and offer new contexts and alternatives for genuine school change.

The rub for all teacher leaders? Their strength comes from the classroom, yet unless they venture out of it, connecting and relating to other adults in the school, they do not fulfill the power implicit in their teaching role. One school principal aptly described this broader perspective. When he was teaching full-time, he believed that he needed to be outside the classroom, engaged in school leadership, to effectively fulfill his role. Now that he was a principal, however, he sensed that he needed to spend more time in the classroom to be effective in his job.

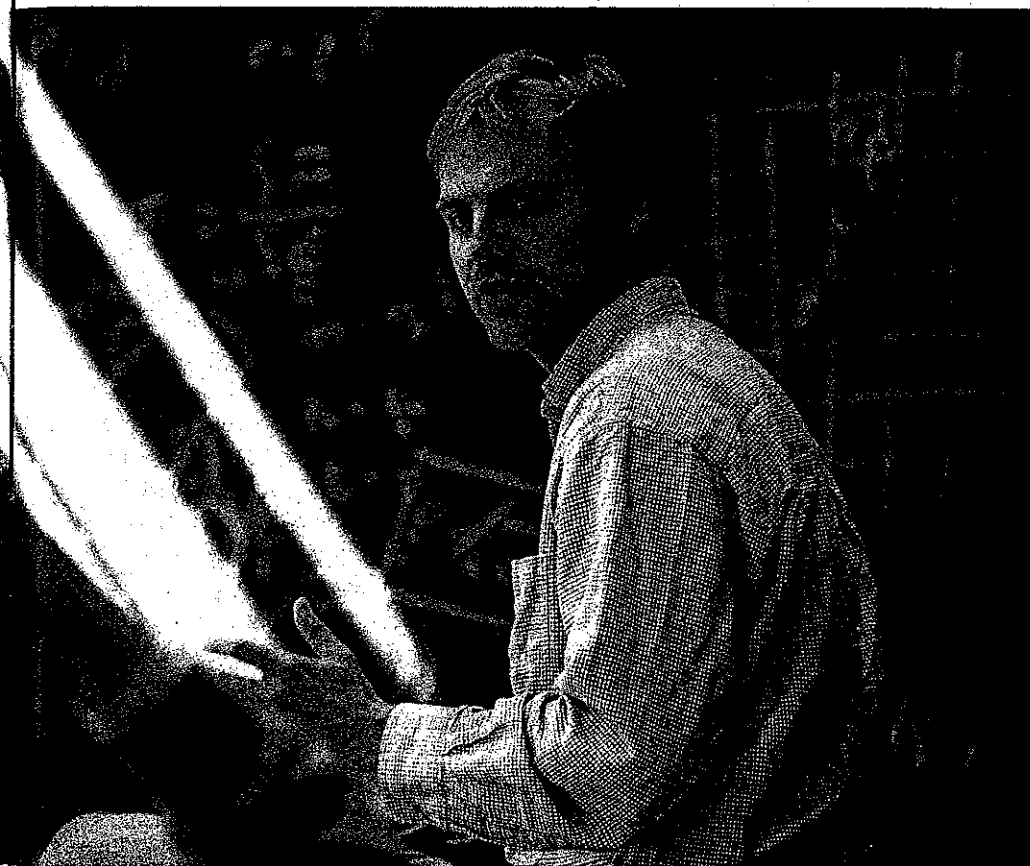
Working both inside and outside the classroom toward the ideal of a collective, collaborative enterprise requires a broader perspective. Successful teacher leaders stay true to their beliefs, couple confidence with humility in their practice, and continually work with colleagues to improve student learning.

## **Staying True to One's Beliefs**

Teacher leaders generally are experienced teachers who have tested their beliefs about teaching and learning and codified



# Leadership



in a nonthreatening way of both teachers and administrators: Why did they use grades to determine eligibility for cocurricular activities? How did they reward students' behavior or academic performance?

In the spring of that year, the principal brought a related issue to the faculty. He questioned the purpose of the two-hour awards assembly held in front of the entire school. Our teacher leader believed that his questions and modeling played a role in the administrator's and the faculty's willingness to reflect on this method of recognizing students. Small changes were the foundation for larger reforms in the school regarding assessment and motivation for learning.

Another teacher leader was deeply involved in the reform efforts that her high school embraced, framed by the *Breaking Ranks* high school restructuring initiative. She came to grips with her beliefs about rigor and accountability when her school adopted a senior exhibition requirement. She believed that

them into a platform that informs their practice. However, teacher leaders still question those underpinnings and always gauge the extent to which their practices align with their philosophies. This injunction to self-knowledge can be a heavy and demanding challenge.

One teacher leader we know gradually developed a deep understanding of how rewards, punishments, and labels impeded learning in his 4th grade classroom. Like his fellow teachers, he had held reading contests, had given stickers and tickets for homework completion, and had distributed increasingly larger prizes to promote learning and good behavior. He realized, though, that he was promoting compliance, not learning.

When this leader moved to a middle school, he created a classroom free of punishments and rewards. He also made his practice public by discussing it frequently at team meetings and with other faculty members. He started asking questions

senior exhibitions would add an insurmountable barrier to graduation for those students deemed most at risk. She worried that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, faced with so many daunting graduation requirements, would drop out. She thought about her own immigrant family members who had not finished high school. They had left school partly for economic reasons but also because the schools they attended didn't value their needs and learning styles. She also thought of the students whose lives she had tried to improve as she helped them work through their disaffection with school. The new plan made her feel like a traitor to her heritage, her family, and her identity as an educator.

This teacher found that part of leadership is not just voicing beliefs but staying the course and looking for ways to deepen and expand others' understanding of thorny issues. She explained to colleagues how difficult it was to reconcile

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her personal stance with the direction the school was taking. She wanted to find a way to make school work better for *all* students, but because of her background, she had deep reservations about her ability to be an effective leader in shaping that change. She has let the silent response from faculty members sit for the time being. Knowing the school as she does,

teacher in a charter school where she was eager to be a change agent. She was committed to backward planning and authentic assessment and wanted everyone else in the school to commit to these practices, too. She could see how clarifying what students needed to know and be able to do from 12th grade down to her 6th grade classes would transform teaching and learning.

## StatusQuote

**Some men see things as they are and say, "Why?" I dream of things that never were and say, "Why not?"**

—George Bernard Shaw  
(often attributed to Robert F. Kennedy)

however, she is certain that individuals and groups will continue her critique of the senior exhibition requirement.

### Nudging: Beyond Bulldozing

A paradox in schools is that teachers—those outstanding facilitators of student learning—are not nearly as effective when it comes to constructively developing their colleagues' learning. The isolation of teaching and the demands on teachers' time are responsible to some degree. To implement reform in schools, however, teachers must break down that isolation. They must reach out, model for others, and help colleagues develop skills and understanding. The way they go about doing so is crucial to any reform's success. As teacher leaders learn some hard lessons about the difficulty of both supporting and critiquing, they develop solid interpersonal skills and overcome inhibitions as they uncover their own and others' leadership.

One teacher leader, fresh out of a graduate school program and with some teaching experience under her belt, plunged into her first day as a new

At the first department meeting of the year, the veteran teachers discussed what they were teaching. When the teacher leader suggested the idea of backward planning, the veteran teachers didn't want to discuss it. Our stalwart teacher leader refused to give up. She broke out chart paper and colored markers, thinking that if she could guide the group with visuals, it would all make sense to them and that backward planning could begin. It didn't.

Reflecting on her method of operating in that school from the vantage point of four more years of experience, she now refers to that mode as the "Bulldozer Effect." She acknowledges that hammering away at her colleagues meant that she failed to recognize the hard work of veteran teachers and too casually dismissed their efforts. Since then, she has learned to be a better listener, "a nudger," as she described it, and an observer of how colleagues influence one another. She learned to stop blasting others, figured out how to open lines of communication, and developed ways to ensure that all

parties listen, hear, trust, and remain open to one another.

A middle school teacher leader needed to surmount his discomfort with true collaboration. He admits that his goal was self-affirmation rather than gaining new perspectives and forging group ownership. He engaged groups in brainstorming and discussion, but all along he waited for the opportunity to push the group in a direction that he had already predetermined. Rather than valuing the input of the group, he valued the *image* of collaboration.

When this teacher participated in collegial collaboration in a graduate program, however, he discovered the give-and-take of shared deliberations and gained a better understanding of collaborative decision making. Over time, this teacher leader learned how to foster his colleagues' capacity for true collaboration. He pushed against their inertia, helping them see that all members' ideas were important. Teacher leaders, in this sense, not only impart knowledge and method but also awaken a sense of collective responsibility.

### Being Vulnerable

As much of the literature about teacher leadership shows, teachers who step out of the acceptable pattern of quiet acquiescence with the status quo take big risks. When they advocate for what they believe is best for students, colleagues may see them as rude, disloyal, or worse.

For example, one young teacher leader agitated to get a bank of computers for students in his classroom. He also advocated for himself and other teachers who needed more time to read student work before they wrote progress reports. In each instance, he challenged decisions that an administrator had made because he believed that it was in the students' interest.

The assistant principal whom he



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teacher leadership today. Although more swashbuckling sorts of courage are likely to be necessary at times, the quieter bravery of teacher leaders is reflected in new patterns of relating to peers and deeper understanding of fellow teachers, suggesting that teachers themselves are becoming more at ease with the genuine complexities of leadership.

### Our Most Precious Resource

Teacher leadership still faces heavy odds. It must compete not only with vested interests in traditional assumptions about leadership, but also with schools that are still uncomfortable with the idea of teacher leaders. Nevertheless, teacher leadership offers a variety of unseen opportunities for forcing schools out of established frames of reference and toward genuine school improvement.

Whether and how teachers decide to lead is determined by what they believe matters in their teaching and, ultimately, by who they are. As Parker Palmer has said,

In our rush to reform education, we have forgotten a simple truth: Reform will never be achieved by renewing appropriations, rewriting curricula, and revising texts if we continue to demean and dishearten the human resource called the teacher, on whom so much depends. (1998, p. 3)

Teacher leaders struggle for control, not power (Gonzales, 2004), over their work lives. They stand up for what is near and dear to them—improving teaching and learning. Although they may experience conflict with the school culture and within themselves, their goal is to catalyze others to work as hard and care as deeply about what happens in classrooms and schools as they do.

In his recent memoir, *Teacher Man*, Frank McCourt writes,

You have to make your own way in the classroom. You have to find yourself.

## Part of leadership is not just voicing beliefs but also looking for ways to deepen others' understanding of thorny issues.

challenged told him that other teachers thought he was adversely affecting school climate with his "rude" behavior. He was shocked. He had never thought that he would be labeled rude for simply disagreeing with a supervisor. He believed that the concerns he had raised were important for the school, not just for the teachers.

Feeling vulnerable and alone, this teacher leader acknowledged that he now weighs the benefit of speaking out against the cost of being seen as stepping out of bounds. Nevertheless, he points out,

This is where courage comes in. Leaders are willing to get burned. Leaders are willing to make themselves vulnerable, and do it again and again and again. (West, 2006)

One teacher leader who was a high school English department head dealt with a sticky situation in her school. A

portion of the faculty questioned the school leadership team's efforts to promote an interdisciplinary curriculum and personalized student learning. On a feedback form, one teacher filled a page and a half with criticism. Instead of becoming defensive, though, this department head overcame her frustration and sought out the teacher. She listened to her concerns, conceding that she had some valid points.

The critic suggested that the faculty needed time to get some issues out into the open, so the leadership team facilitated a faculty forum to brainstorm ideas. The climate was positive and led to more open meetings and honest communication. Furthermore, it showed the leadership team's willingness to include others in developing goals and plans.

This collegial and collaborative leadership model is the subtle domain of

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You have to develop your own style, your own techniques. You have to tell the truth or you'll be found out. (2005, p. 113)

As students of teacher leadership, we believe that teachers have a profound effect on the quality of schools, influencing the schools themselves and defining innovative leadership in the 21st century. However, this leadership can only come from teachers who "tell the truth" and who accept the vulnerability that results from doing so. **EL**

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